

February 14, 2005

## **State Dept. Relaxes Visa Rules for Some Scientists and Students**

By KRISTEN A. LEE

**W**ASHINGTON, Feb. 13 - Responding to concerns that onerous visa requirements are discouraging foreign students and scientists from coming to the United States, the State Department has extended the time many of them can remain before renewing security clearances.

The clearance is required for foreigners working in areas the government deems "sensitive." Fields like chemistry, engineering and pharmacology can be in that category.

The change will lengthen the validity of the clearance to up to four years for students, two for working scientists, making it easier to remain in the United States for the duration of work or study programs. Until now, they had to reapply for clearance each year. The State Department consulted with the Department of Homeland Security before granting the extension.

"This change sends a clear message that the U.S. highly encourages those with great scientific minds to explore studying and working in our country," Asa Hutchinson, under secretary for border and transportation security in the Department of Homeland Security, said in a statement.

The security clearance program, known as Visas Mantis, was established in 1998 to prevent scientists from illegally transferring technology out of the country. After the Sept. 11 attacks, the caseload increased and the process became more time-consuming. Several of those who carried out the Sept. 11 hijackings had been issued student visas.

A study released last February by the Government Accountability Office found that scientists had been waiting an average of 67 days for a decision on their Visas Mantis clearances. The office is to release a follow-up report on Friday at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Organizations that promote visas for educators and scientists have complained that delays and stringent requirements have discouraged foreign students from applying to programs in the United States. The Institute of International Education found that the number of foreign students enrolled in American colleges decreased by 2.4 percent in the 2003-2004

academic year, the first decline since the 1970's.

The State Department has taken other steps to expedite Visas Mantis security clearance, including investing \$1 million in technology upgrades. The agency estimates that the extension will reduce by 50 percent the number of Visas Mantis clearances to be handled each year.

Terry W. Hartle of the American Council on Education, a trade group representing colleges, applauded the move. Mr. Hartle said officials must now address a larger problem - the perception among foreign students that the United States is not as welcoming as it was before Sept. 11. "This perceptual problem is real," he said, "and one that we will have to work to overcome."